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ABSTRACT

Designed to help educators examine their current student assessment practices and ensure that assessment activities lead to real improvements, this paper lists and discusses nine principles for assessing student learning. The nine principles are: (1) the assessment of student learning begins with educational values; (2) assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time; (3) assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes; (4) assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes; (5) assessment works best when it is ongoing, not episodic; (6) assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved; (7) assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about; (8) assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change; and (9) through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public. (ECC)

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leadership abstracts

PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE FOR ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING

developed under the auspices of the AAHE Assessment Forum

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American colleges have a long history of grading and certifying student work. The more recent practice of assessment builds on that history by looking at student achievement not only within courses but across them, asking about cumulative learning outcomes. As a systematic process of gathering, interpreting, and using information about student learning, assessment is a powerful tool for educational improvement.

Today, hundreds of colleges and universities are doing assessment, at the classroom, program, and institutional levels. The practice has become a universal expectation for accreditation and a frequent object of state mandate; nine out of ten institutions now report that they have some type of assessment activity under way. Along the way, a "wisdom of practice" has emerged; the nine principles that follow constitute an attempt to capture some of that practical wisdom.

Guidelines for Assessment

1. The assessment of student learning begins with educational values. Assessment is not an end in itself but a vehicle for educational improvement. Its effective practice, then, begins with and enacts a vision of the kinds of learning we most value for students and strive to help them achieve. Educational values should drive not only *what* we choose to assess but also *how* we do so. Where questions about educational mission and values are skipped over, assessment threatens to be an exercise in measuring what is easy, rather than a process of improving what we really care about.

2. Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time. Learning is a complex process. It entails not only what students know but what they can do with what they know; it involves not only knowledge and abilities but values, attitudes, and habits of mind that affect both academic success and performance beyond the classroom. Assessment should reflect these understandings by employing a diverse array of methods, including those that call for actual performance, using them over time so as to reveal change, growth, and increasing degrees of integration. Such an approach aims for a more complete and accurate picture of learning, and therefore firmer bases for improving students' educational experience.

3. Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes. Assessment is a goal-oriented process. It entails comparing educational performance with educational purposes and expectations—these derived from the institution's mission, from faculty intentions in program and course design, and from knowledge of students' own goals. Where program purposes lack specificity or agreement, assessment as a process pushes a campus toward clarity about where to aim and what standards to apply; assessment also prompts attention to where and how program goals will be taught and learned. Clear, shared, implementable goals are the cornerstone for assessment that is focused and useful.

4. Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes. Information about outcomes is of high importance; where students end up matters greatly. But to improve outcomes, we need to know about student experience along the way—about the curricula, teaching, and kind of student effort that lead to particular outcomes. Assessment can help us understand which students learn best under what conditions; with such knowledge comes the capacity to improve the whole of their learning.

5. Assessment works best when it is ongoing, not episodic. Assessment is a process whose power is cumulative. Though isolated, one-shot assessment can be better than none, improvement is best fostered when assessment entails a linked series of activities undertaken over time. This may mean tracking the progress of individual students, or of cohorts of students; it may mean collecting the same examples of student performance or using the same instrument semester after semester. The point is to monitor progress toward intended goals in a spirit of continuous improvement. Along the way, the assessment process itself should be evaluated and refined in light of emerging insights.

6. Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community

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are involved. Student learning is a campuswide responsibility, and assessment is a way of enacting that responsibility. Thus, while assessment efforts may start small, the aim over time is to involve people from across the educational community. Faculty play an especially important role, but questions of assessment cannot be fully addressed without participation by student affairs educators, librarians, administrators, and students. Assessment may also involve individuals from beyond the campus (alumni/ae, trustees, employers) whose experience can enrich the sense of appropriate aims and standards for learning. Thus understood, assessment is not a task for small groups of experts but a collaborative activity; its aim is wider, better-informed attention to student learning by all parties with a stake in its improvement.

7. Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really are about. Assessment recognizes the value of information in the process of improvement. But to be useful, information must be connected to issues or questions that people really care about. This implies assessment approaches that produce evidence that relevant parties will find credible, suggestive, and applicable to decisions that need to be made. It means thinking in advance about how the information will be used, and by whom. The point of assessment is not to gather data and return results; it is a process that starts with the questions of decision makers, that involves them in the gathering and interpreting of data, and that informs and helps guide continuous improvement.

8. Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change. Assessment alone changes little. Its greatest contribution comes on campuses where the quality of teaching and learning is visibly valued and worked at. On such campuses, the push to improve educational performance is a visible and primary goal of leadership; improving the quality of undergraduate education is central to the institution's planning, budgeting, and personnel decisions. On such campuses, information about learning outcomes is seen as an integral part of decision making, and avidly sought.

9. Through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public. There is a compelling public stake in education. As educators, we have a responsibility to the publics that support or depend on us to provide information about the ways in which our students meet goals and expectations. But that responsibility goes beyond the reporting of such information; our deeper obligation—to ourselves, our students, and society—is to improve. Those to whom educators are accountable have a corresponding obligation to support such attempts at improvement.

A Vision of Education

It is hoped that campuses will find these principles helpful for examining current practice and for developing and discussing their own principles. Further, the authors hope that the principles here will support campus assessment leaders in their work with the administrators, policymakers, and legislators who often set the conditions that determine whether assessment will lead to real improvement. This second purpose seems especially important given the current national debate about educational standards, testing, and accountability. The links between assessment and improved student learning must not be lost in this debate.

The core value behind this document is the importance of improving education that entails high expectations for all students, active forms of learning, coherent curricula, and effective out-of-class opportunities. To these ends, we in the higher education community need assessment—systematic, usable information about student learning—that helps us fulfill our responsibilities to the students who come to us for an education and to the publics whose trust supports our work.

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—Guest editor, Kay M. McClenney, Education Commission of the States

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